

Laughing Matters

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Body

Melissa McCarthy was hovering six feet above Los Angeles, in a glass tube, wearing a helmet and goggles. Her limbs were spread out like a starfish, with her legs bent at the knee as if she were a teenager reading on her stomach on her bed and her arms bent at the elbow so that had she been upright, they would have made the shape of a cactus.

Originally, we were scheduled to go to a rage room, which, I think, is a place where you can beat things to death in a disturbing, passive-aggressive cry for help. Neither of us had ever been to one, but honestly, by the time it was suggested to me, it sounded like the cure of and for the century. I'll probably never know. The local rage room was open for only 15 minutes on a Thursday, which we all found strange because, considering the state of the world, a rage room should maybe be open around the clock as a public service. ("You need to have them like Starbucks," McCarthy told me later.)

Her publicist tried, but ultimately the rage room wouldn't open early, not even for Melissa McCarthy, and she called to tell me that we would be changing to indoor sky diving at the iFly at Universal Studios. "I hope you see the metaphor here," her publicist said to me. "She's flying, she's up high, she's soaring." I nodded and dutifully wrote this down.

McCarthy arrived. She's tiny, just 5-foot-2, and her face is a shiny, magnetic sparkle -- its resting expression is cheerfulness, its cheeks are dimpled, its inquisitiveness is somehow loving. It draws people energetically near it so that when people passed her on Universal City Walk, something forces them to turn toward her, having no idea why, only to then find out that she actually was the actress Melissa McCarthy. She is prone to wide-eyed expressions of surprise; she is prone to making her mouth as round as her eyes as she listens in awe or surprise or delight. It's a staple of some of her Midwestern-seeming characters, a delighted incredulity when faced with the modern world.

A tall, athletic man who worked for iFly led us to change into purple jumpsuits that were made out of some environment-defiant mixture of nylon and other proprietary materials and forced us to watch an instructional video about all the safety and fun we were going to have. McCarthy was excited. I tried to be, too, but truthfully, I was still kind of bummed. A rage room! I could really find my way through a rage metaphor right now. I asked her why she wanted to do it in the first place. Was she as angry as the rest of us? She said it sounded fun. I asked her how she chose indoor sky diving as a runner-up. Was she ready to jet off and leave this earth and colonize another planet and start over like the rest of us? No, she said. The rage room was closed and this also sounded fun. I blinked.

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I sat on deck, watching her take her turn. It had been a long time since I'd participated in an overt magazine stunt whose purpose was to set a scene for the opening paragraph of a story, to crystallize and illuminate a person for the reader and create a metaphor through which to weave a story -- it's just not done anymore. And I didn't want to waste time flying just because it's fun when we had a lot to talk about: The way the world has changed comedy, the grave wounds that make somebody go into this weird profession.

I looked from my notebook to the tube to my notebook to the tube, and yeah, I guess she was flying, she was up high, she was soaring. Then I noticed her face beneath her helmet: Her mouth and eyes open as round as her dimples, her face an expression of unmitigated wonder and joy, and there beyond the glass, I noticed for the first time just what a good time she seemed to be having.

This winter, McCarthy, 48, sat in a dirty Midtown apartment in Manhattan, thinking about the good old days. The day's set was an apartment decorated to look like the journalist/forgery Lee Israel's 1980s Upper West Side apartment, for her new movie, "Can You Ever Forgive Me?" The shoot took place during the same era when McCarthy lived in New York as a young woman, back when New York was gross and not as polished and filled with finance bros (which is its own kind of gross) and perfect. Was that what was making her feel so nostalgic?

It was the '80s or maybe it was Lee Israel herself. Israel wrote biographies about celebrities but couldn't support herself, so she began forging letters in the voices of celebrities, a kind of fan fiction that allowed her work to finally be something it never was, which was valued. McCarthy was drawn to a character so different from herself: "Talk about conflicted and challenging," she said. "Talk about someone who is not trying to be likable at all." The more McCarthy dug into her, the more she began to really understand how isolated Israel was. "I've always been a bit obsessed with someone who is in the middle of such a huge city with so many people and yet is alone. And chooses to be alone! And puts herself in positions to not make new acquaintances, to not meet people." Israel would go to gay bars, during a time when gay bars were just for gay men, and drink in a corner with her headphones on so that no one would talk to her.

McCarthy knew the movie, which was written by Nicole Holofcener and Jeff Whitty and directed by Marielle Heller, had promise to be great, and early reviews suggest that she was right. Already, she has been called "caustic, profane, curmudgeonly, affecting and very funny" (NPR), "nothing short of miraculous" (Big Apple Reviews), in her "best performance to date" (Variety), "the ideal template for McCarthy to project her talents onto a more sophisticated plane" (IndieWire).

[Review: Melissa McCarthy is criminally good in "Can You Ever Forgive Me?"]

If aliens landed and you wanted them to understand the toll of the recent years on the American psyche, you could easily do so by explaining that in 2018, the same comic supernova who gave us "Spy" and "Heat" and Megan from "Bridesmaids" and Sean Spicer on "S.N.L." was making a serious drama, just her second starring dramatic role since 2014's "St. Vincent." She wouldn't like the implications of this, though. She doesn't understand why people think funny people aren't allowed to also do drama. And yes, that's fair, but also: The big fall movie from the most bankable comic star on this planet is a drama that will leave you in tears.

Has anyone ever worked so hard to make us laugh as Melissa McCarthy? Has anyone ever excavated the core intersection of supermarket game-show passion and tedium like her Padgett, as she loaded her cart with sides of beef and ate out of a mayo jar with her hands "to keep her energy up" in the "Supermarket Sweep" parody on "S.N.L."? Has anyone ever subverted her appearance -- wholesome, smiley, Midwestern -- as well as her "S.N.L." Coach Kelly, throwing an actual toaster at a basketball player? Has anyone ever so undermined conventional gender expectations more than McCarthy cornering the air marshal played by her husband Ben Falcone on the flight in "Bridesmaids," asking him if he wanted to get back into that restroom and "not rest," her teeth over her bottom lip, her entire body making a strangely chill humping motion? ("No," he says. "I gotta get back to my seat." "No," she responds, with some tongue work. "You gotta get back on my seat.")

Consider the outtake from "This Is Forty" in which McCarthy berates every person in the room. "I'm going to light you all on fire." "I'm glad your husband died." When asked if she has been drinking: "I'm gonna slit somebody open

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like a fish and drink their blood. That's what I'm going to drink." As she went, Paul Rudd and Leslie Mann laugh too visibly and too loudly for any of the film to be usable, but McCarthy keeps going. Judd Apatow, the movie's director, couldn't use it because of the laughter, but he also couldn't allow it to be lost to legend and so he ran it during the movie's credits. Everyone, including McCarthy, knew in the moment that it wasn't going to make it into the movie. She didn't care. She was making people laugh.

It's strange to watch that now, just a scene of a person riffing for pure enjoyment. Comedy has changed so much since then; it has become unrecognizable since I first began interviewing her in 2016. It has gone from being a variety of ways to tickle a person -- real life, funny because it's true, ironic funny, deadpan funny, parody funny, no-duh funny, slapstick, farce, absurdity, pratfalls, a real variety -- to merely, glumly reflecting what a terrible world this has become. It is purely reactive. It is completely tethered to world events. For example, a few years ago, "Colbert" was flailing, trying to find its footing. But the recent saturation of bad news (or the news producer they hired from "CBS This Morning," or both) made it a hit.

"Can You Ever Forgive Me?" is her third movie this year. The others, "Life of the Party" and "The Happytime Murders," were comedies and were not quite so adored. She read those reviews, too. She reads all kinds of movie reviews. She sees that when a drama doesn't work, it was "a good effort" and gets a thoughtful review, but when a comedy doesn't work, it's a crime against humanity and gets taken outside behind the shed. And shot. And then burned. And then the ashes are put up on a scaffold so that future generations of filmmakers can choose never to dare. She worries that that's what's going to happen -- that if this keeps up, if no one can find the value in just plain comedy, there will be no discernible demand and then they won't get made and fast forward millions of years and all that will be left are Marvel movies, Mad Max video games and those jumpsuits we wore at the iFly.

Critics never loved comedies, not even in her most beloved era, the '80s, but those movies could still get audiences; those movies could still be financed. Now audiences have access to Rotten Tomatoes ratings and every single review from every single paper; it is hard to come back from overwhelmingly negative critical consensus. Put it this way: Twenty years ago, there were three pure comedies in the Top 10 highest-grossing movies of the year. This year, so far, there are zero.

She worries about comedy. She worries about the gloom and fatigue that flows beneath the streets, waiting to suck away her will to laugh and to make laughter. In 2013, she and Falcone, created their production company, On the Day Productions, which allows them to make their movies on their terms, with their own comic tastes. They keep their costs down, making movies like "Life of the Party" and "The Boss" and next year's "Superintelligence" in Atlanta for an audience they know still exists. They keep their sets closed and tight and full of only people they know and trust. Some people call their movies failures because they're not critically beloved, but they mostly break even during their opening weekends. They still make millions and millions of dollars -- and keep her among Hollywood's highest-paid actresses -- and offer a 90-minute refuge for a whole lot of people, so exactly which part of it is a failure?

"We're in a lot of trouble if it all becomes cops and capes and horror and grim," she said. At night, she and Falcone, who directed "Life of the Party," "Tammy" and "The Boss," sit in what they call their old-people chairs with glasses of Scotch and talk about whether comedy can be saved. Falcone worries that the world and the movies the world wants to see are getting darker and darker and darker because the spectrum of human awareness has widened and the mood has dampened and we've taken the movies down with us. But darkness should make you seek out comedy even more, shouldn't it? It used to. "It's why they make comedies after the war," McCarthy said. "You need to see the human experience, and you need to be able to laugh at yourself instead of just making fun of other people. I'm not saying what we do is so important, but it's a little stupid thing that maybe can take some of the tension off." Here she thinks about Lee Israel again. She thinks about how people protect themselves from the world.

McCarthy's carefully curated day begins at 4:30 in the morning either in the couple's house in Los Angeles, with the cobalt blue life-size silverback gorilla statue in the backyard or at their newer house, in Atlanta, which has a full-size resin horse in the backyard. She silently putters through the house in the dark, feeling like a criminal. She tries not to wake their two daughters or her golden retrievers Homer and Harper. (They bought the house in Atlanta

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because they started making so many films there. "It is the dumbest thing that you can't make a movie in Hollywood," she said. "I feel like, boy, California, you blew that one with everything you've got. You had one job.")

She makes coffee, and she does not turn on the news; she does not check her email; she does not do Transcendental Meditation. She watches TV -- "I treat myself right," she says -- an old episode of "Knight Rider," which she thinks everyone should be rewatching, or the original episodes of "The Incredible Hulk."

"I watch Lou Ferrigno freak out, throw a clearly rubber tree. Bill Bixby's high-waisted super chambray-colored pants. They're always so pristine. Even though he's backpacking in the woods, he's so freshly laundered. I had no memory of the softer side of the Hulk. Lou Ferrigno, as the Hulk, picked up a baby bird's nest -- or did he pick up actual baby birds? I can't remember which. I was like: 'You're not supposed to touch a baby bird and put them back in a tree. They'd die and then their mother would leave them.' Is that true? If you touch a bird does the mother really take off? That's what we were always told, right?" Back to the Hulk. "It's great. The music. There's. So. Much. Score."

After her episode, she invites the world into her home, but reluctantly, but carefully, but slowly. She walks outside to get The Los Angeles Times, whose print edition is delivered to her doorstep. She reads The New York Times on her iPad. But then she turns to her National Geographic, which she also has delivered. You have to look at the photos in print to really get it -- a toucan, a polar bear. She looks at Nat Geo and she looks at The Times and she can't reconcile it. Everyone's talking about borders lately. They should be talking about this stuff. "Let's talk about polar bears and the toucan because it's so random and someone is taking these beautiful pictures. That's what the world is. It's not borders. Of course, it's all that, too, but, like, let's also remember how amazing the whole planet is."

On weekends, she and Falcone put their phones away for the duration. On Sundays, they gather their friends they have been working with since the Groundlings improv school -- since forever -- to their home for dinner. Falcone makes meatballs and sauce or McCarthy makes meatloaf. Sometimes Falcone and Steve Mallory, their old Groundlings friend and frequent co-writer and co-star, grill steaks. McCarthy and Falcone talk to each other lovingly, doing different characters and little voices that they've developed over time, each with its own pace and energy and voice, moving in and out of them with no transition as if they're additional guests in their home just inhabiting their bodies. Mallory says she will one minute be a tough-talking Midwestern person, and then in a second she'll be a too-literal scientist, and then she'll turn into cross-eyed, pageboyed Marbles, this character she has had forever that talks real loopy.

She hates how the entire world is set up to make people more efficient. She hates the trend that every home needs an open-concept design of one room leading to another. She sees what it's really about, which is not you spending time with your kids while you cook and they watch TV but you being able to be everywhere at once. "We are literally knocking down walls to help ourselves multitask," she said. "Maybe I'll start a business called 'Walls,' and my specialty will be putting walls in, because in 10 years we're all going to want them again because we've made our houses into studio apartments." She puts her hands to her mouth as if she's hollering: " 'The bed's in the kitchen!' "

At night, while she takes a bath, her iPad comes out. She could spend hours there on Pinterest or on Etsy. She buys bullheads and wallpaper and Moroccan rugs and duck heads and a moose head. She buys a bunch of 1980s-style dresses from an Etsy shop owned by woman in New Mexico for the '80s-themed party scene in "Life of the Party." She orders these things under a different name but she also wants to call the woman and say: "Your dresses are in my movie! Thank you for the dresses! Go see the movie!"

The curation extends to her sets. Last October, I visited her in Atlanta on the set of "Life of the Party," which was cozy and loose, like one of those Sunday-night dinners McCarthy and Falcone host. "Life of the Party" is wholesome McCarthy -- a joyful, mostly bewildered middle-aged McCarthy character who returns to school after her husband dumps her. This is the kind of movie they love: no political implications, relevant only in the way it tickles them when they think of some of the lines and stunts and characters.

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The sets, particularly the ones on which Falcone is directing, look the same again and again because they're populated by people who have known one another, some of them as far back as the Groundlings. On this one: Matt Walsh, who was also in "Ghostbusters" with McCarthy, now playing her husband. Mallory, who wrote "The Boss" and appeared in "Tammy" and "Identity Thief" and whom McCarthy and Falcone had invited as a guest writer to sharpen the day's dialogue. Damon Jones, who also appeared in both of those movies. Maya Rudolph, who has been in just about everything with her.

The crew is mostly the same, too. There's Pamela the makeup artist, who has been with her forever. There's Sheila, the script supervisor going all the way back to "Bridesmaids," who tells stories about the nervous breakdown she almost had trying to keep track of all the ad-libbing in the Brazilian-restaurant scene. McCarthy and Falcone think they're going to use this new assistant director again. Once they find someone, they tend to keep her around. They do what they call "crazy checks" on the people they hire. McCarthy, or a proxy, calls around and wants to know: Do they at some point freak out and lose their temper and yell at people? Are they nice? Are they nice even when certain people aren't around? People talking to extras disrespectfully makes her "blood cold."

When she was training at the Groundlings, she was taught the improv rules, to say "Yes and" and "Why not?" ad infinitum until you land at the most extreme and funniest state of play. When she's in front of these people, she finds it easier to do that, to take it 10 levels further than a regular comedian would. The freedom and comfort allows her to strip away the natural human vanity that undermines comedy as she tries out new lines and bombs incessantly. "Vanity," she told me, "is a huge waste of time and you never get good work that way." Magic happens when you bomb so much. She learned that in the Groundlings, too. "You try 20 to get one." It allows her to be ornery and vulnerable in "The Heat." It allows her to be cantankerous and lost in "Tammy." It allows her to be bombastic and desperate in "The Boss."

The few rules on set are strict ones. The main one is: be present, which translates into people only using their phones for direct, necessary communication. Phones drive McCarthy crazy, so the rule is that you can use your phone if you need to, but no scrolling. If you're scrolling, you're not actually checking anything. You're checking on your 15th cousin. "You're absent-mindedly removing yourself from the space you are in," she says.

She sees why phones are necessary, she accepts their existence, but she thinks the world got much worse and more apathetic and less willing to say "Yes and" and "Why not?" the minute everyone had a smartphone. She'll post on Instagram but she won't read Instagram. She won't even do email. People can text her or they can call her. Email will drown her. The return lobs will necessitate checking for yet another answer, and who knows when that will come -- when she's sitting down for dinner with her daughters? When she's writing with Falcone? When she's about to think of something really funny or new or interesting?

She wants her set to be safe from this. She wants it to be a place where conversations can get weird: "Do you know so-and-so has a sixth toe?" is her example of a weird turn in a conversation. She wants to know fun facts. She wants to know where people grew up. Or:

"Not that I want to wear pantyhose," she was saying. She was in full camera makeup and wore fake eyelashes that made her eyes even greener. "But, God, if I did I would want to just crack open a L'eggs. Who thought of that? Who was like: 'We should put pantyhose in a chicken egg. They love wearing pantyhose, and they love large chicken eggs.' At some point, somebody was sitting around holding a bourbon and said: 'Women love eggs. You know why.' " She held a pretend bourbon in her hand and put the emphasis on the why but never stopped smiling.

"Guys," she said. When she speaks, she is soft and kind. She does not suck the life force out of everything she comes in contact with, unlike other funny people I've interviewed. "I think we've cracked the code on why L'eggs pantyhose used to come in an egg. We have to look up when that was started, but the theory is, which I'm horrified is right, is because somebody said, 'Women have eggs, they love pantyhose, let's put them together!' "

A crowd had gathered, and everyone was laughing -- Ben, Maya, Steve, Matt, Pamela, Sheila, the producer Chris Henchy. They were running ahead of schedule. The days have been long on this one, but nothing crazy. Everyone agrees nothing crazy.

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See? You can't have a conversation like that when everyone's scrolling on their phones.

Before she was allowed to stay up late on Saturday nights, growing up on a corn-and-soybean farm in Plainfield, Ill., she would sneak down the stairs of her childhood home and hide near the TV room where her parents couldn't see her and watch Gilda Radner on "Saturday Night Live." She watched '80s movies: Michael Dorsey's bid for a career in "Tootsie," the Delta Tau Chi's quest to stay on campus in "Animal House," Chevy Chase trying to get his family to Wally World in "Vacation." But Radner was one of her idols. Radner had it all -- a wild physicality and a deep emotional intelligence, a fearlessness.

McCarthy wanted to be wild, too. She was always trying characters on. She was a cheerleader one year, the next a Goth with black lipstick and bangs who wouldn't talk to anyone. She went to Catholic school for 12 years and wore a uniform but would say, "Knee down and neck up is mine." She had friends. She was on the student council. She played tennis. But then she would dye her hair blue-black and wear Kabuki makeup and full-length capes. That wasn't teenage moodiness. There was no real darkness behind it. What can she say? She lived in a small town. She was bored. "Everyone was wearing the same sweater from the Limited, and I could go to the thrift store and find an entire, full-blown costume for the same price." Her boyfriend wore a magician's hat and cape and spats to prom, along with what she called a "Puttin' on the Ritz" cane.

She cultivated characters that were the opposite of her real self, all of them designed to make people laugh. Most of them were old because what's more opposite a 20-year-old than an 80-year-old? She grew up with her great-grandmother. One of her first jobs in fourth grade was as a caretaker for her 93-year-old Aunt Hilda. McCarthy would go to her house after school and make her a snack and hang out while McCarthy's mom cleaned downstairs. Her first real job was at a nursing home. She began to collect wigs (not from the nursing home), one to bring each of her elderly or societally fringe characters to life.

She said she was never trying to escape herself. It wasn't like that at all. She had no emotional need beyond wondering what it was like to be these particular characters. The first time she did standup, she wore a giant wig. "I like me," she said. This was over the summer, when we met at a hotel off Fifth Avenue and she was wearing a beanie, a pink cat T-shirt and a cross-body cellphone carrier. "But I am me." She doesn't even really understand my questions about what kind of loneliness makes a person go into her line of work. How can she tell you if she felt rejected for not being someone wearing the same Limited sweater everyone else was wearing when she doesn't even understand why you would want to wear the same clothes as everyone else in the first place?

People don't really get her. They want to know her philosophy, her feelings on irony, how she does it. Falcone told me that everyone always wants to know what big secret she's keeping. "I think people, in the effort to keep things poppy, don't look and see that while she's incredibly kind and Midwestern and gentle, she's also really complicated as a human, as we all are," Falcone told me. "I think what people are missing is the fact that she's pretty, she's funny, she's smart. She also doesn't take [expletive]. She's told all the time, 'You can't do this or that in the acting world.' But she says, 'Why not' and 'Yes and' all the time, which I think is a hallmark of crazy people but also people that are successful."

McCarthy ends every evening by taking a bath. Yes, she realizes this is not the first time she has mentioned baths. "Yes, I have considered that I should have been a star of 'Minority Report.' How do I get a job as a pre-cog, guys? I'm just saying. I loved 'Minority Report.' If they do that again, I'm like, 'Sign me up for that pre-cog.' And just yell, 'Run.' One line. One tremendous line."

In her bath, McCarthy thinks about originality. She thinks about the movies she grew up watching and how she waited for the day when she would finally be able to do that.

By the time we sat down at that hotel, "Life of the Party" had come and gone. Critics called it "the latest Melissa McCarthy star vehicle that fails to do justice to the sheer awesomeness of its leading lady" (RogerEbert.com) and said she "falls into the same trap she did in 'Tammy' and 'The Boss,' the two other movies she wrote with her husband/director Ben Falcone. By that we mean she allows her laugh instincts to get buried in a blanket of bland"

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(Rolling Stone). "Looking for something fun to take Mom to for Mother's Day? Do your mom (and yourself) a favor and steer clear of 'Life of the Party' " (ibid.).

Critics say her comedies are just sanitized versions of a time she's nostalgic for. But the thing that keeps her making the kind of movies she and Falcone make isn't nostalgia. It's just that that's just the last time comedy was allowed to be a random assortment of things to make you laugh. It's her refusal to let the state of the world come and take comedy along with it. After "Bridesmaids," the media called her an overnight success, even though she was past 40 and had, by that time, "worked like an animal" for decades. All these years and all this hard work and she finally got to Wally World. But what happens when you get to Wally World and you find out it's closed?

In their chairs, Falcone says maybe we're already too lost. McCarthy says, "Yeah, but what if?"

I went to see "The Happytime Murders" one night this summer because I was writing this article. The movie theater was also playing "The Wife," which was nearly full. But I was alone in my theater except for one couple. All the teenagers were in the Starbucks across the street even though there was a raunchy gross-out movie that seemed perfectly made for them.

The movie, which was directed by Brian Henson, Jim Henson's son, is a comedy that's maybe also a race allegory between puppets and humans? I couldn't quite tell. The resolution of the mystery at the heart of it involves -- I hope I'm beyond the statute of limitations with this crucial spoiler -- a puppet's pubic hair not being the same color as the hair on her puppet head. This is perhaps the least obscene detail in the entire film.

"The Happytime Murders" came out under the cover of late August with a small scandal attached to it. ("Sesame Street" was upset.) A few critics called it the worst movie of the year. It was called "tired, bloodless stuff" (The Times). Elsewhere it was said that "this R-rated look at a serial killer running wild in a puppet-populated L.A., has what it takes to be a contender for worst of the decade" (Rolling Stone). They said it was "basically, disgusting" and "reprehensible" (The New Yorker) and "a joyless, soulless slog" (Slate).

Honestly, it wasn't that bad. The novelty of puppets ejaculating in a movie after a lifetime of indoctrination to "Sesame Street" characters does not go stale after 91 minutes. Best of all, it is the dirty, cursing, obscene version of McCarthy, which is my favorite. Her character gets a liver replacement using a puppet liver and she becomes prone to the ailments of the puppets (including a glucose-snorting-through-licorice-straws addiction). Whatever Freudian issues young Henson was trying to work out, there are some laughs in there -- real, full-body ones that remind you that laughter is actually a bodily response to something new and sometimes a little surprising. It happened during a scene when one of the characters watches an octopus/cow porn shoot that consists of the octopus milking the cow lasciviously. My breath spurt out like little gasps and my body spasmed in time with them. It seemed like a cough at first, as if maybe my body was expelling something? Or maybe I was sobbing unwittingly? Was I dry-heaving? I thought, What the hell is happening here? What is this thing happening to my body? But it was pleasurable. It forced my body to course -- briefly, very briefly -- with something that felt like well-being.

She's right. You forget all this when you don't go to the movies. You forget how much your experience of a comedy depends on your being in a room full of people who are not just also laughing, but who also came just so they could laugh -- even though in my screening it was just those two other people. There is something poignant about the act of entering the theater to laugh; there is something that feels revolutionary about it.

Comedy changes. Comedy has changed. I finally watched the comedy special people keep recommending to me, "Nanette," and it's O.K.-funny, sure, but it's so relevant and so about the problems of the world that it feels more like a humorous TED Talk than a comedy special. "The Daily Show" and "Colbert" and "Samantha Bee" are the open-concept homes of efficiency where you can get your comedy, your information and your outrage all from one source -- things that used to be sold separately. The only time I laughed this week was during the day when my favorite Twitter feed, @_FloridaMan, tweeted out video of some idiot jet skiing down a highway that's an actual news clip from real life. I can barely make it through the cold open of "S.N.L.," it's so depressing.

McCarthy has created her own world time and again -- at home and on set and in her childhood. And yes, bubbles don't just keep things in; they keep things out, too. They keep out input and challenges, and sometimes they even keep out change. But what if it's valid to not want to change? What if it's valid to keep misery at bay?

I don't have any bubbles anymore; nobody I know does, either. There was a story in the paper about a guy who doesn't read the news and people's faces melted off. Everyone I know has become political. My Facebook feed is a nightmare of radicalized everyone and fighting all the time and stupid JPGs with angry aphorisms and petitions. I've become someone who uses the word "revolutionary" to describe being in a movie theater. I wrote this story six times, and each time it was returned to me as too depressing and listless. I tried to figure out how to make it work -- a Melissa McCarthy article should probably not be depressing, I agreed -- and my editor gave me some suggestions, but I couldn't hear him above the TVs in our newsroom, which all blared detailed accounts of sexual assault and miscarriages of justice and a climate-change story that said we would all be desiccated human Slim Jim husks of ourselves, withered by the parching sun in 20 years and outrage outrage outrage until we are limp and exhausted and miserable.

What I'm saying is that maybe McCarthy is onto something. Why stay out here when it is so much nicer in there, behind the gates with the resin zoo and the old "Hulk" episodes? Why look for meaning in everything when the entire point of the comedy exercise is to transcend meaning and responsibility and poignancy? She's funny. She's polar bears and toucans. That's it. That's what she aspires to. Take it or leave it, but please don't leave it because it has taken me this long to recognize it and that's not great. What I'm saying is that maybe we should consider trying this her way. So:

McCarthy was flying, she was way up high, she was soaring. She was hovering six feet above Los Angeles, her body and soul and her essence and her gifts protected by a glass tube (was the glass tube the point this whole time?), wearing a purple jumpsuit made out of some environment-defiant mixture of nylon and other proprietary materials and a helmet and goggles. Her limbs were spread out like a starfish, with her legs bent at the knee as if she were a teenager reading on her stomach on her bed and her arms bent at the elbow so that had she been upright, they would have made the shape of a cactus.

Six feet is not so far up, but it is far enough away from us to see us but not catch our ills of gloom and despondence. During her last turn, the wind was kicked up and she was sent way, way up, to the top of the tube, so that she was even higher and had even more distance. I looked at her face, with its wonder. There she was -- her mouth and eyes were round like her dimples in an expression of unmitigated wonder and joy. There she was, up in the air, high above everyone, yelling to me that I just had to try it.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/17/magazine/nobody-works-harder-for-a-laugh-than-melissa-mccarthy.html>

Graphic

PHOTOS: PHOTO (PHOTOGRAPH BY CHLOE HARTSTEIN

HAIR, PETER BUTLER

MAKEUP, MATIN.) (MM38)

" BRIDESMAIDS , " 2011

"SPY," 2015

"GHOSTBUSTERS," 2016 (PHOTOGRAPHS BY SUZANNE HANOVER/UNIVERSAL/EVERETT

LARRY HORRICKS/20TH CENTURY FOX/EVERETT

HOPPER STONE/COLUMBIA/ EVERETT) (MM42)

"SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE," 2017

"LIFE OF THE PARTY," 2018

"CAN YOU EVER FORGIVE ME?" 2018 (PHOTOGRAPHS BY WILL HEATH/NBC

HOPPER STONE/WARNER BROS./EVERETT

MARY CYBULSKI/20TH CENTURY FOX.) (MM43)

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